

like an easy birth.

I bend and unfasten my sandals.

Stepping down from their slight eminence,

I lift my sandals by the heel straps

and sling them into position, side by side,

in the closet. They'll never be lonely.

Shoes are the twins among garments

and finish each other's sentences.

For economy of motion, skirt, stockings, underpants
come off all at once, but I separate them.

It's a small quarrel, easily ignored.

Skirt, go to bed. Stockings, drape over the chair.

Underpants, into the corner with you.

I'll deal with you all later.

Good night clothes. Until tomorrow.

THE HENS THAT CAME WITH THE PLACE

We've bought a farm,

a little twenty-acre farm;

it came with chickens. Eleven hens.

Mornings, these hens

come out to cluck at us,

and if they're out of food or water

and in a mood for grouching,

they cluck very sternly.

With a dim-witted but serious look,
they stand at the chicken-wire fence

and go raawk, raaawk, raaaawk,

until, like childish gods who've been off playing

with thunderbolts,

we realize,

we're guilty.

I've never had chickens before.

Once I had a chick

a neighbor lady gave me.

I was only four.

The chick got sick and was no more,

but I remember its inverted eyelid,

wonder of that small world.

Its sleepy sickly closing

like the eyes of a red-haired boy I knew,

or the turgid closing

of the eye on an immobile miniature alligator

displayed downtown in the dusty window

of an insurance company along with

a triptych of pictures (a wreck,

a tornado, an earthquake)

and the time of day
on a black electric clock with white numbers
encircled by the name
of the Insurance.

But these hens, they are not
like that.
They are fat and red and rusty,
and anxious to remind us:
We came with the place!

At night, the hens jostle one another
on the perch in the henhouse
to get the best position; what that is
I can't fathom,
maybe where it feels they won't get eaten.
This goes on for an hour
after sundown, shoving and clucking:
a rustle, squawk, and then a heavy slump
as a dislodged chicken hits the floor of the coop.
Fortunately, these bodies rise,
and then more shoving
until at last they close
those unnatural eyelids
and sleep.

On hot days, if the water dries to ash
or they have drunk it all, one hen at least
is apt to scale the brace of the fence and escape
over the wall into the pasture
where there's a watering trough.
The commotion of this escape is enough to warn us:
chickens are breaking out; bring water.
And then they gather, clucking,
We do not want to get out,
but you leave us no choice.
We, who came with the place
must be minded. Shame on you.

Then I take the hose and fill
their water tank.
They strut and sip and toss their heads and gargle,
throats full, like tasters at the winery on the hill.

These chickens are stern.
They will not excuse us in neglect,
and yet, when all is mended,
there is a fluster of: She meant no harm.
She is new here.
And then a chorus: Oh Layena, chicken-manna,
oh lettuce leaf, oh rotten apple
with a bug in it,
oh stoney water from the outdoor faucet,

oh lovely, lovely chicken house.
Oh farm.
This is our place.
We came with it.

CUT HER HAIR

"Cut her hair. It takes
the strength from her. She's
too skinny," they said to Mother.
It's true, I was light
as a fish bone on the beach
that summer;
a dried smelt of a girl at six,
I blew this way and that way
in the winds of my own laughter,
shrieking and running at the beauty parlor
while Mother had her hair done.
Elsewhere, the war went on
I knew, but what was war?
Hitler, that bad man; the absent boys next door
who sent home nazi flags or coconuts,
depending where they were.
But I ran careless in the beauty shop
which smelled of perfume and ammonia; I ran
up and down between the dryers
where ladies sat
having their curls set.

"How about a finger wave?"
Alvina said to Mother, and I pictured
fingers gaily waving, as to men
in Pathe newsreels marching ten by ten.
In the beauty shop, where ladies came
to shop for beauty, nails
glittered like carapace of insects,
and curled at the ends of fingers
like the hooves of horses I'd seen
crippled by neglect.
Never neglected, I knew I was lucky.
"Oh, eat your Cream of Wheat!"
Mother cried, like other mothers of that time,
"Just think, of children starving overseas.
Oh, eat." I cared
about those children;
but I was thin by naughty preference
and chose to run or read instead of eating,
and my hair grew.
My long hair. Commonly
french-braided, then turned
up in loops like handles on a purse